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ABSTRACT

The concept of private languages holds that each person's words are symbols with which he identifies certain of his perceptions. Language operates in the public sphere only so long as the symbols used by a speaker to denote his perceptions roughly correspond to the symbols the listener uses for his perceptions. The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein argued that the concept of private language is logically absurd. His argument, in brief, was that it is impossible for a person to maintain any series of symbols corresponding to his perceptions as there is no way for such a series to be accurately maintained. The Austrian playwright Peter Handke seems to believe and support this argument in his plays. An examination of five plays shows Handke exploring various situations which are created by words in context, the central point being to expose to the audience the fact that plays are neither make-believe nor reenactments; they are events occurring only here now. (TS)

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Private Language/Public Language: The Plays of Peter Handke

The concept of private languages is a very old concept. It can, at this time, be accurately described as the common doctrine of language. The private langauge concept holds that each person's langauge is a thing of his own; each person's words are symbols with which he identifies certain of his perceptions. Language operates in the public sphere only so long as the symbols used by a speaker to denote his own perceptions roughly correspond to the symbols the listener uses for his perceptions. According to this view, then, language works like this: I possess a set of symbols which correspond to a set of perceptions which have occurred in my life; when I speak these symbols to another, he sorts them according to perceptions which have occurred in his life, and--as long as we maintain a roughly similar set of correspondences--we communicate. We can determine this similarity of correspondences by various non-linguistic criteria. For instance, I use the symbol 'pain' to denote a perception which is associated (in my public behavior) with contortions, grimaces and loud groans; if my listener uses the same symbol for his perception associated with the same public behavior, we may say that our private languages roughly correspond.

The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein argued, in his Philosophical Investigations (1953), that the concept of private languages is logically absurd. His argument, in brief, was that it is impossible for a person to maintain any series of symbols corresponding to his perceptions, for there is no way for such a series to be maintained accurately. For example: yesterday I experienced a sensation which I decided to denote

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with the symbol 'pain;' today I experience a sensation which I strongly suspect may be what I have chosen to call 'pain' again. But can I be sure? I cannot. Memory is my only record of yesterday's sensation, and it is demonstrably unreliable and cannot be tested for accuracy in this case. I am left with the choice of either making my private language entirely quixotic--using the symbol 'pain' any time it occurs to me--or adding a new symbol for my every discrete sensation. And if I cannot use my own symbols coherently, how can I expect to use them to communicate with others? It is, of course, part of the notion of the private language that I cannot check the accuracy of my memory by comparing my symbolic use of 'pain' with another person's use of the same symbol.

Language, according to Wittgenstein, is a sensible concept only in the public sphere, only as a tool for public communication. A word is not a symbol in the traditional sense, but rather a tool with various uses in the public intercourse of human beings.

Wittgenstein's arguments have important implications. First, in place of the older concept of words as symbols applied to things in the world, Wittgenstein asserts that things in the world are perceived and structured by means of words. St. Augustine wrote that he learned to speak by learning the names of various objects and processes in the world, and many people continue to think of learning a language as a process of this nature. Wittgenstein argues that language conventions are learned first, and then things in the world are applied to them. When a child is taught to speak he may at first make various category mistakes: if he is taught that a green wall is called 'wall,' he may point to a green chair and call it 'wall.' Eventually he learns the

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correct way to refer to things, and we traditionally say that he has learned what walls and chairs and green are; but Wittgenstain would argue that he has learned what 'wall' and 'chair' and 'green' are and how they are used. The distinction is important--it is the difference between learning about the world and learning about words.

In Wittgenstein's view, what we might call statements of fact--'the wall is green' for example--are really language conventions. My statement, "The wall is green," asserts nothing about the wall; it asserts that I, the speaker, know how to use the phrase 'the wall is green.' When such a statement of fact is made, we usually say that it is either true or untrue. When we say that it is untrue, Wittgenstein says that it is being used incorrectly.

The correct use of a word is its meaning. That is, the meaning of a word is the sum of its accepted conventional functions in the public domain. To be sure, words can be used ignorantly, or with intent to deceive, but the recognizability of these exceptional instances is due to the fact that words do have meanings and that these meanings are determined by their public use. For most words, though not necessarily for all (and it is not clear whether Wittgenstein thought the exceptions to be significant), the meaning of a word is its use in some public context.

One public context in which words are used is the theatre. And the Austrian playwright Peter Handke has been concerned with using the theatre to demonstrate some of the implications of Wittgenstein's thought. The theatre is a context which forms a part of the meanings of the words which are uttered in the theatre. Handke's first performed play, Offending the Audience (Publikumsbeschimpfung), is centrally concerned

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with this simple fact. Handke has written of this play, "The stage is an artifact; I wanted this play to point out that every word, every utterance onstage is dramaturgy. Every human utterance the theatre presents as natural is not evolved, but produced. I wanted to show the 'producedness' of the theatre."[1]

Offending the Audience is one of Handke's 'speaking-pieces' (Sprechstücke). It consists of sixty-six paragraphs of various lengths which are not grouped together in any way nor assigned to individual speakers. There is no action, there are only words: "The speak-ins . . . are spectacles without pictures, inasmuch as they give no picture of the world. They point to the world not by way of pictures but by way of words. The words of the speak-ins don't point to the world as something lying outside the words but to the world in the words themselves."[2] Offending the Audience proceeds by stating certain themes, then repeating and elaborating on them. In general, these themes are: that the audience has certain expectations, none of which are going to be fulfilled; that none of the elements of theatre are present in the piece; that the piece is a prologue to other works, other performances, other visits to the theatre; and that the audience itself is the focus of attention. About two-thirds of the way through the piece the speakers begin haranguing and insulting the audience members, and the piece ends with a long series of vile names and ugly accusations which the speakers hurl toward the listeners.

The ~~offence~~ offense to the audience with which the playwright is concerned, however, is not this final string of curses; it is rather the rejection of all theatrical expectations which is harped upon in the first part of the piece. These audience expectations are rejected and mocked

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because they involve considering the theatre in non-theatrical contexts--contexts of other realities and re-enactment of events. Just before the torrent of abuse begins, Handke has his speaker(s) say:

> But before you leave you will be offended . . . . While we are offending you, you won't just hear us, you will listen to us . . . . But we won't offend <u>you</u>, we will merely use offensive words which you yourselves use. We will contradict ourselves with our offenses. We will mean no one in particular. We will only create an acoustic pattern. You won't have to feel offended. You were warned in advance, so you can feel quite unoffended while we're offending you. Since you are probably thoroughly offended already, we will waste no more time before thoroughly offending you, you chuckleheads.

Handke's offensive language creates an "acoustic pattern;" the audience members are quite free to feel unoffended by that which is offensive. This is because that which is offensive is offensive in contexts other than the theatre, and the speaking-piece exists only in a theatrical context. Handke insists on this context, paradoxically, in several passages which deny it: "This is no drama. No action that has occurred elsewhere is re-enacted here. Only a now and a now and a now exist here. This is no make-believe that re-enacts an action that happened once upon a time." And it almost seems to be true that there is no drama; by almost no criterion is this piece a play. Even Eric Bentley's all-encompassing definition--"A impersonates B while C looks on"--is apparently not applicable. But the speakers are speaking words written for this occasion by the playwright, and "every utterance

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onstage is dramaturgy." The function of this speaking-piece is " . . . making people aware of the world of the theatre,"[3] making people aware that the theatre is a specific context which informs the meanings of the words uttered within that context.

In Self-Accusation, the second of the Sprechstücke, Handke explores other situations which are created by words in contexts. This piece also consists of a series of statements to be made by an undetermined number of speakers. Self-Accusation begins with a number of statements which recount the process of learning to define situations by learning the proper use of words:

> I looked. I saw objects. I looked at indicated objects. I indicated indicated objects. I learned the designation of indicated objects. I learned the designation of objects that cannot be indicated. I learned. I remembered. I remembered the signs I learned. I saw designated forms. I designated similar forms with the same name. I designated difference between dissimilar forms. I designated absent forms. I learned to fear absent forms. I learned to wish for the presence of absent forms. I learned the words "to wish" and "to fear."

The piece continues with a series of statements concerning the learning of proper behavior--"I became capable of playing according to the rules; I was supposed to avoid an infraction of the rules of the game"--and ends with a long list of confessions about various infractions of the rules. Each confession begins with a simple statement--I did. I spat. I walked. I spoke. etc.--and then describes contexts in which the designated actions can be considered infractions of the rules. Each of

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these infractions is a language-created situation; each is created by structuring events in the world according to the conventions of language. One of the confessions begins, "I failed to observe the rules of language. I committed linguistic blunders. I used words thoughtlessly." Indeed, every transgression that is confessed to can be seen as a failure to observe the rules of language. Handke has written about this piece, "I had been planning a play in which there is a genuine plot, with a story, a kind of confession--there was constant confessing onstage, in dialogue form. This plan was gradually reduced to words, which don't refer to objects or problems onstage; they merely quote, and what they do least is give the appearance of another reality--rather, they create their own reality of words." Self-Accusation ends by affirming the theatrical context of the words spoken: "I went to the theatre. I heard this piece. I spoke this piece. I wrote this piece."

Handke's final speaking-piece, Cries for Help, is a dialogue which resembles a children's game. A speaker is searching for the word 'help.' He utters other words--first in paragraphs, then sentences, then phrases, and finally single words--and each utterance is responded to with the word "no," the loudness and intensity of the response varying with the acoustic proximity of the speaker to the desired word. In the introduction to this piece, Handke wrote that " . . . while the speakers are seeking the word help they are in need of help; once having found the word, they no longer need any help . . . once able to ~~shout~~ shout help, they no longer need to shout for help; they are relieved that they can shout help."[5] In other words, the speakers are not shouting for help, they are shouting for 'help.' Seldom has a philosophical distinction of this sort been so succinctly expressed on stage.

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Kaspar, Handke's first full-length play, is a drama in which ". . . history is conceived as a story of sentences." The play, in which the situation of Kaspar Hauser is used as "the model of a sort of linguistic myth,"[6] dramatizes a man's encounter with language, from the first realization of the word-as-concept to the logical limits of language as a tool.

Kaspar (the only character to appear onstage) begins the play in possession of a single sentence, an acoustic pattern, "I want to be a person like somebody else was once." ("Ich möcht ein solcher werden sie einmal ein andrer gewesen ist."). Kaspar uses this sentence in attempting to deal with every element of his surroundings. (Handke specifies that Kaspar is surrounded by specifically theatrical objects). He speaks to a chair and to a table; he expresses bewilderment and contentment; he begins to learn the limits of his own possessions--his body and his sentence.

In all this activity, Kaspar is observed and commented upon by invisible prompters (Einsager). The prompters begin to teach Kaspar. First they take away his sentence and leave him defenseless. Then they teach him to speak. As he learns to speak, "suddenly he sees everything correctly. Suddenly he understands space. He can put things in order . . . . He arranges things. He becomes more perfect, more and more perfect, a real human being; finally he speaks in verse, and, when the greatest possible order has been attained onstage, in beautiful verse. The world has become a poem to him."[7] Kaspar learns to arrange his universe by learning to arrange sounds. Verse is the most complex and orderly arrangement of sounds in language, and this corresponds to the final ordering of the objects in Kaspar's world. This order is the peak

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of Kaspar's development and the climax of the first act of the play. Just before the intermission Kaspar says:

Every object
has become
accessible
to me
and I
am receptive
to each object.
Now I know what I want:
I want
to be
quiet
and every object
that I find sinister
I designate as mine
so that it stops
being sinister to me.

Kaspar, through his words, has become master of his world. He is not, however, the master of his words, and this is shown in the second act of the play.

The second act begins with Kaspar's recitation, in verse, of his autobiography. He explains that he has mastered his world by learning to speak about it. As he speaks, new Kaspars come onstage and aid him in ordering the objects in the world. Suddenly Kaspar makes a terrifying discovery:

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What was it
that
I said
just now?
If I only knew
what I said
just now!

Swiftly and catastrophically, Kaspar's world and his mastery of it dissolve. The other Kaspars begin to shriek and hiss and the prompters join them, making hideous sounds through loudspeakers. Two or three of the substitute Kaspars taunt Kaspar by mocking the idea of language--"Jeder Satz ist für die Katz!"--and Kaspar's control of his words disappears. He slips from verse into prose, then into disconnected, broken speech and finally into nonsense. The curtain jerks closed with Kaspar whimpering in fear of what Handke calls the final phase: "Who is Kaspar now? Kaspar, who is now Kaspar? What is now, Kaspar? What is now Kaspar, Kaspar?"

Kaspar, at the end of the play, has no control over himself because he has no control over his words. He has learned to designate himself as 'I,' but he does not know the meaning of 'I.' He has no concept of himself because the words which the prompters taught him have no room for such a concept. Wittgenstein wrote, "That which we cannot speak of, we must consign to silence."[8] The silence is the final model of Kaspar.

Silence is also the subject of Handke's next play, The Ward Wants to be Warden, or My Foot My Tutor. In this hour-long play, no words are spoken. In fourteen sequences, the warden demonstrates

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dominance and mastery over the ward. Both characters wear masks; the play is without word or expression. If Kaspar demonstrates, in part, that some things must be consigned to silence, this work shows that some things must be spoken of. Without sound or expression, there is only fear and menace. Language may be idiotic, but silence can be terrifying.

Peter Handke has said, "The only thing that pre-occupies me as a writer . . . is nausea at the stupid speechification and the resulting brutalization of people."[9] His plays have been concerned with the implications and limitations of the uses of language as described by Ludwig Wittgenstein. The speaking-pieces demonstrate that the meaning of a word is the use of that word in a specific context, and that the contexts in which words are used can determine our responses to our own actions. Kaspar shows that worlds are ordered by learning to arrange the parts of a language, and attempts to shatter the illusion that men who exercise control by means of words also control words; Kaspar shows the domination of man by language. The Ward Wants to be Warden evokes the terrors of silence. All of these plays, according to the playwright, have the same basic aim: "One should learn to be nauseated by language. . . . At least that would be a beginning of consciousness."[10]

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Notes

[1]Peter Handke, "Nauseated by Language: An Interview," The Drama Review, 15, no. 1 (Fall, 1970), p. 57.

[2]Peter Handke, Kaspar and Other Plays, trans. Michael Roloff (New York: Noonday, 1969), p. ix. All quotations not noted are from this edition.

[3]"Nuaseated by Language," p. 57.

[4]Ibid., pp. 57-58.

[5]Peter Handke, Cries for Help, The Drama Review, 15, no. 1, p. 84.

[6]Nauseated by Language," p. 61.

[7]Ibid.

[8]Ludwig Wittgenstein, Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, trans. C. K. Ogden (London: Blackwell, 1922), number 7.

[9]"Nauseated by Language," p. 61.

[10]Ibid.